Comment on the Papers by Sara Loy and Kathleen Lubey

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I have the distinct pleasure of commenting on essays by Sara Loy and Kathleen Lubey. Sara Loy is a graduate student in the department of English at Indiana University where she specializes in Victorian literature. She is the recipient of IU's Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies Graduate Fellowship and winner of the 2022 William and Mary Burgan Prize for the Outstanding Presentation by a Graduate Student from the Midwest Victorian Studies Association annual conference. Kathleen Lubey is a professor in the Department of English at St. John's University. She is author of two books: *Excitable Imaginations: Eroticism and Reading in Britain, 1660-1760* (Bucknell University Press, 2012) and the (very) recent *What Pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest Since the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford University Press, 2022) as well as a number of articles. She is also a sought-after podcast guest!

Loy's "Childhood Bound" considers the manner in which eighteenth-century children's literature explored and created a circumscribed mode of agency for children. Lubey's "The Virtual Character of Pornography" takes on the thorny terrain of AI-generated pornography to argue that the generality of "woman" represented in AI pornography is a realization of what pornography has always known, at least since the eighteenth century: that figures depicted are not real, not real (at least) in the sense that you and I sitting in this seminar room are real. What unites these papers is a sense, to which I'll return, that all autonomous beings be they the child characters of *The History of Little Goodie Two Shoes* or the ever-oddly lit characters of AI porn, or, indeed you and I, are fundamentally surfaces upon which psychological depth and agentic capacity are inscribed without a whole lot of evidence that anything lies beneath that surface.

Loy's paper argues, "that the new importance of childhood in the long eighteenth century, linked as it was to larger project of nationhood and questions of definition, reveals the ways in which Britons sought to stabilize the child's inherently in-flux identity in order to create the stable adult that represented and reified a stable British society." The theory of childhood Loy finds through her archive is one in which the child's autonomy was allowed for insofar as it was bounded by adults. This seems right to me, and it is important that Loy locates this account of childhood more broadly within the political realm. The circumscribed autonomy of children, it seems, is, like adult tools and vehicles shrunk down for children's play and learning, a shrunken-down version of the adult liberal subject whose freedom is only ever expressed in a highly circumscribed manner.

Lubey's paper begins with a consideration the ethical concerns surrounding AI pornography, the problems it poses for consent—both for deep fakes, and I'd argue for the individuals who appear in the images and videos of upon which these models were trained—and the question of dehumanization, which has been a challenge proffered against pornography from at least second wave feminism forward. AI pornography, however, may, as Lubey suggests, develop an aesthetic that "put[s] realism… to the side." Though this aesthetic may seem new and a product of the technological, Lubey argues that the technologies of the visual, first photography, then video, actually obscured this aesthetic conceit that had been a part of pornography from the eighteenth century on. Pornography, in Lubey's telling, is about gendered social identities and gender ideology, not gendered individuals. If there is a "real" of pornography it is the trick that is played whereby we conflate the individual with the very gender ideology that produces the individual.

And so, I have the challenging and somewhat delicate task of trying to put together a paper on children's literature and one on pornography. To do so, I'd like to follow Sara Loy's lead and turn to John Locke. While she focuses on the 1693 *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, I want to return us to an earlier text, Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). We'll remember that Locke spends much of the first treatise arguing against the literal patriarchalism of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680), and indeed, having done so, he returns to Filmer in the 2nd Treatise (because, well, Locke isn't done dunking on Filmer). Locke does so in order to theorize a liberal political subject who is governed because she consents to be governed, and not because the King is the father of his people. Rejecting such paternalism, Locke still must contend with the problem of children who must still be governed by their parents whether they like it or not. This is where, of course, the age of reason comes in which sets the parameters under which the parent may be said to "rule" the child.

As Locke writes:

> *Children*, I confess, are not born in this full state of *equality*, though they are born to it. Their parents have a sort of rule and jurisdiction over them, when they come into the world, and for some time after; but it is but a temporary one. The bonds of this subjection are like the swaddling clothes they are wrapt up in, and supported by, in the weakness of their infancy: age and reason as they grow up loosen them, till at length they drop quite off, and leave a man at his own free disposal. (2nd treatise p. 31, VI, par 55)

Children, then, are characterized by a circumscribed autonomy, but one that is ever growing, like their own bodies. Adults, too, are at their "free disposal" only insofar as they "have the liberty to dispose of [their] action and possessions of [their] own will, within the permission of … law." Reason, which grants such "free disposal" is fundamentally a "capacity of knowing that law" (par 59). That is, the basis of adult autonomy is coming to know the degree to which it is enabled and constrained.

The Lockean political subject is thus the rational being who knows she is circumscribed as an agent. The Lockean political subject has also, unlike Filmer's children of the monarch, consented to be governed. That consent, though, is a tricky thing because it is so rarely expressly given. Much like the drunk man held liable for actions of which he has no consciousness in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the Lockean political subject of the *Second Treatise* is subjected regardless of what resides in his or her consciousness but rather those actions he or she takes to "enjoy… any part of the dominions of any government."[1] Because we cannot know what passes in each other's minds, the doctrine of tacit consent lends itself to virtuality. I'm not quite sure that this is the same virtuality of Kathy's AI porn stars, but I tend to think it is. Lockean political subjects, like Lockean persons, are fundamentally virtual beings. That is, we impute the consent to be governed even though the limits of empiricism mean that we can never know if one has actually consented. We instead attend to surfaces and impute depths. That might be why it is easier to imagine the exploitation of a product of algorithms than the agency of children. The surface of the AI adult actor is far closer to the surface of an adult human than that of a human child.

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[1] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), Ch. VIII, Sec. 119.